

# Recording the Experiences of War: Personal Accounts of World War I (USA)

By [Edward G. Lengel](#)

## Summary

The experiences of American soldiers, uniformed noncombatants, and civilians on the Western Front in the First World War never fully entered the popular American consciousness. The reasons for this are more complex than simply the relatively short duration of active American participation in the conflict. During and immediately after the war, American personal accounts mostly echoed official arguments that the United States had played a decisive military role on the Western Front. In the 1920s and 1930s a wave of more self-reflective accounts appeared, but a public preoccupied with the Great Depression largely ignored them. Finally, the 50th anniversary of the American entry into the war in 1967-1968 coincided with the powerful anti-war mood that Vietnam engendered.

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## Introduction

American participants in the First World War began processing memories of their experiences immediately after they had occurred, sometimes jotting their thoughts down in diaries and letters. Unexpressed thoughts changed over the course of days, months and years until some participants decided to record them in print. Their testimonies helped to shape not only the views of those who had never experienced the war firsthand, but also the attitudes of participants in the same events. Though personalized to greater or lesser degrees, printed accounts of wartime service helped to meld a collective consciousness about American participation in the war. Soldiers' cathartic expressions of their experiences were thus

subsumed into a popular narrative that ascribed meaning – even if that meaning was ambiguous, or anticlimactic – to the conflict.

Official sources attempted to give shape to the American war narrative from the beginning. On 14 January 1919, just two months after the war in Europe ended, the U.S. Army General Staff's Historical Section issued a classified report on "The American Military Factor in the War." The report was intended to establish the official American line on the meaning and impact of the appearance of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) on the Western Front in the late spring of 1918 and to counter European "Anti-American Propaganda." The French and British armies, the report asserted, were on the verge of total defeat when the first substantial American forces – elements of the 2d and 3d Divisions—arrived at the front near Château-Thierry at the end of May and beginning of June. At that time:

There was nothing left on the line save a weak string of small [French] detachments. Behind these, for many miles, disbanded French troops were pillaging their own country. The news had reached Paris. Profound discouragement had seized both the Army and the public; and, indeed, there seemed to be very little hope left. It was at this moment that the 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Division was rushed to the front. . . it would be very difficult indeed to exaggerate the important results that were the outcome of an incident of such apparently small scale. The impression on the broken French troops of seeing our men go into position, the impression on French public opinion of knowing that an American division as a unit had been thrown into a vital part of the line, had a steadying effect. It gave France, so to speak, time to take a breath and to come back once more to the old hope that perhaps after all the United States might prove to be her salvation and the deciding factor in the war. ...[the 2d Division] had fought superbly, it had by its example improved the French troops in its neighbourhood to an incalculable extent; and it had, partly through the errors of the German High Command, succeeded in stopping the gaping hole through which Paris already thought it saw the advance of the German columns.<sup>1</sup>

Citing this and other examples of American heroism juxtaposed with French and sometimes British cowardice, the report concluded that "there is every ground for stating that the United States has played the decisive part in the war."<sup>2</sup> This official line would characterize arguments used at the Versailles negotiating table and would also shape published American personal accounts of the war published through the 1920s.

## Early Accounts, 1918-1929

Early American accounts of wartime service are largely but not entirely of a certain type. The majority present the conflict along the lines of the Army Historical Section's official report of

1919. Thus Col. [Albertus Wright Catlin \(1868-1933\)](#), a Medal of Honor recipient who commanded the 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment in Belleau Wood, wrote patronizingly of his former French comrades-in-arms:

Pity swelled our hearts as we watched them stagger back to the rear, a bruised and broken remnant, with utter despair written on their war-weary faces. To them the war was lost, life held no hope. We wanted to take them by the hand and say, 'Brother, at last we have come.'<sup>3</sup>

And he wrote triumphantly of the Americans in battle:

The Germans, who had become accustomed to the weakening resistance of the French, did not know what to make of [the Americans] at first. But they soon learned the taste of American mettle and metal. They were stopped in their overwhelming rush, and stopped for good.<sup>4</sup>

Other notable published American accounts from this period include: Martin Gulberg, *A War Diary* (1919), [Martin Hogan \(1901\)](#), *The Shamrock Battalion of the Rainbow* (1919), [Joseph Rendinell \(1894\)](#), *One Man's War* (1928), and [W.A. Sirmon \(1894-1971\)](#), *That's War* (1929), all of which present similar outlooks. Accounts by American women published during this period if anything exude greater patriotism and a sense of American mission, albeit with somewhat greater sympathy for the French and British, than male memoirs. Examples of their accounts include: [Elsie Janis \(1889-1956\)](#), *The Big Show* (1919), [Katherine Morse \(1888\)](#), *The Uncensored Letters of a Canteen Girl* (1920), and Katherine Shortall, *A "Y" Girl in France* (1919). All such works made sense of the war in terms of a simple conflict of good versus bad, in which fresh American Doughboys ultimately made the decisive difference by virtue of their confidence, ingenuity, high morale, and superior physical strength relative to their wizened and demoralized Allies.

There were exceptions. Novelist [Hervey Allen \(1889-1949\)](#) published one of the most powerful American war memoirs, titled *Toward the Flame: A War Diary*, in 1926 with a revised edition appearing in 1934. Allen's account resembles in many respects the finer British memoirs being published at the same time. While his memoir is hardly a paean to disillusionment, it anticipated soon-to-be-published works by European authors such as [Edmund Blunden \(1896-1974\)](#), [Siegfried Sassoon \(1886-1967\)](#), and [Erich Maria Remarque \(1898-1970\)](#). Instead of presenting the Doughboys as cocky, devil-may-care superheroes, Allen portrays them with gentle sympathy as well-meaning boys who were transformed, both for better and for worse, by their war experiences. Shockingly, Allen's account ends not with victory, but with a young soldier's cry of horror as German infantry with flamethrowers

assault and ultimately overwhelm the tiny American garrison at Fismette in August 1918.<sup>5</sup>

Another counter-narrative of the war is [Addie W. Hunton \(1866\)](#) and [Kathryn M. Johnson \(1878\)](#), *Two Colored Women in the A.E.F.* (1920). Many American war diaries and memoirs, such as [Robert Lee Bullard \(1861-1947\)](#) *Personalities and Reminiscences of the War* (1925) and [Chris Emmett \(1886\)](#) *Give 'Way to the Right: Serving with the A.E.F. in France During the World War* (1934) express racist views toward African American troops, unjustly accusing them of incompetence. Comparatively, there are very few memoirs by African-Americans. Hunton and Johnson's memoir, authored by two black women, is a rare first-hand account exposing the occasionally brutal racism that existed at all levels of the A.E.F.

## Depression-Era Accounts, 1929-1941

Soldiers' accounts published during the Great Depression exude greater ambiguity, and sometimes even anguish, about memories of the war. As the American economy faltered, the plight of American veterans was very much in the public eye, particularly in the aftermath of the ill-fated Bonus March of 1932. Soldiers' attempts to come to grips with their memories through published memoirs alternated between anger—sometimes bloodthirsty—and despair. Medal of Honor recipient [John Lewis Barkley \(1895-1966\)](#) memoir *No Hard Feelings!* (1930) echoes in savagery and violence German veteran [Ernst Jünger \(1895-1998\)](#) *Storm of Steel* (published in English in 1929). Some American authors, such as [Alden Brooks \(1882-1964\)](#) in *As I Saw It* (1930), wrote bitterly—and in tones reflective of British memoirs of the period—of the alleged incompetence of the American high command.<sup>6</sup> [Charles Minder \(1895\)](#) *This Man's War* (1931) presents a rare testament of a soldier who became increasingly opposed to the war through his experiences of combat. Finally, [Harry Zander \(1888\)](#) *Thirteen Years in Hell* (1933) exposes in full the anguish of a veteran physically and emotionally wrecked by the war who seeks to reclaim his place in American society. Memoirs of American women remained relatively uncommon and inconsequential, with the exception of Shirley Millard's powerfully antiwar *I Saw Them Die* (1936). Medical memoirs such as [Harvey Cushing \(1869-1939\)](#) *From a Surgeon's Journal* (1936) powerfully reveal the human cost of war in detail to which the American public had been hitherto unaccustomed.

## War Birds

The ambiguous and sometimes embittered memoirs published during the Great Depression reflected the popularly pessimistic mood of those times, but ultimately proved unsatisfying to a public that preferred escapism as a way out of its troubles. With no clear sense of right and wrong, such accounts not only blurred the boundaries between victors and vanquished, but more generally between Americans and Europeans. In so doing, they challenged readers'

concepts of national identity. During the war, Pershing's strategy for victory had been posited on the assumption that the Yanks introduced an element to the war—namely, confidence in victory and a sense of national mission—that the Europeans had lost. If Depression era-memoirs reflected reality, Pershing's strategy had been founded on a fallacy and there was very little to differentiate Americans and Europeans after all. Who then, had won the war—if it had indeed been won at all?

Memoirs of aerial combat provided a resolution to the ambiguity, re-introducing aspects of valor, excitement, and meaning that infantry memoirs appeared to have lost while at the same time acknowledging many veterans' feelings of pain and loss. Aerial memoirs also presented heroes for the American public to look up to in times of need. Many of the war's former infantry heroes, lionized in the aftermath of Versailles, turned out to be all-too-human to serve as typically American role models. [Charles Whittlesey \(1884\)](#), commander of the so-called "Lost Battalion," who had been awarded the Medal of Honor and trumpeted intensely (to his sorrow) by the American press, had been so traumatized by his wartime experiences that he committed suicide in 1921. Even [Alvin C. York \(1887-1964\)](#), possibly America's best-known war hero, shunned the limelight until actor Gary Cooper adopted his public persona in the film *Sergeant York* in 1941. Ace [Eddie Rickenbacker \(1890-1973\)](#), who emerged from the war as a barnstorming pilot and successful airline executive, was in that respect a more palatable hero for a public eager to soar above the ugly truths of America's suffering streets.

Rickenbacker's own memoir, *Fighting the Flying Circus*, had been published in 1919. Similar works appeared around the same time or shortly thereafter, such as [Charles Biddle \(1890-1972\)](#), *The Way of the Eagle* (1919) and [John Grider \(1892-1918\)](#), *War Birds* (1926). Unlike infantry memoirs, aerial memoirs remained in demand throughout the 1930s. These included: [Norman Archibald \(1894\)](#), *Heaven High, Hell Deep* (1935), [Charles Codman \(1893-1956\)](#), *Contact* (1937), [Willis Fitch \(1884\)](#), *Wings in the Night* (1938), [James Norman Hall \(1887-1951\)](#), *Flying with Chaucer* (1930), [Edwin C. Parsons \(1892-1968\)](#), *The Great Adventure* (1935), George Turnure, *Flight Log and War Letters* (1936), and Charles Veil, *Adventure's a Wench* (1934). The continuing popularity of aerial memoirs reflected the still-powerful market for movies on the same subject, with *Wings* (1927) followed by *The Dawn Patrol* in 1930 and again in 1938.

## World War II to Vietnam

The disappearance of published American First World War memoirs between the entry of the United States into World War II in 1941 and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of American entry into World War I in 1967-1968 is nothing short of remarkable. To be sure, European memoirs became

rare during the same period, but the near absence of American accounts during the Cold War era belies explanation. There was, naturally, a sense that World War II both superseded and presented a standing rebuke to what had once been presented as “The War to End All Wars.” The Second World War and the Cold War – the latter with overtones of potential apocalypse – also dwarfed American participation in the First War, in scale if not necessarily in significance. Yet millions of American veterans, both men and women, continued to live and work in society. It is perhaps telling that the author of one of the only noteworthy American memoirs published in this period, [Ernest Wrentmore \(1905-1983\)](#), *In Spite of Hell* (1958), was still in his mid-fifties, having enlisted in 1917 when he was only twelve years old. For the most part, however, World War I veterans had become utterly invisible in the United States.

## The Fiftieth Anniversary Fizzles

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of American entry into the war produced a minor resurgence of war memoir writing and publication. On the whole, though, it was a dud. The timing, coming at the height of the Vietnam War, was terrible. Veterans of any war were not held in high regard in American society, especially among the young and veterans of World War I must have seemed – as indeed they were – representatives of a long-bygone era. The continuing relevance of the First World War was difficult to understand. There were nevertheless some valuable entries among the memoirs published around the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, including: Charles Abels, *The Last of the Fighting Four* (1968), [Connell Albertine \(1897-1974\)](#), *The Yankee Doughboy* (1968), [Charles Butler \(1893-1951\)](#), *The Yanks are Coming* (1963), and Robert Kean, *Dear Murraine* (1969). For the most part, however, these memoirs appeared in tiny print runs and had little popular impact.

## Conclusion

With the passing of the war’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, memoirs no longer appear as former Doughboys’ spontaneous or considered attempts to make sense of their experiences. Memories faded with the passage of time, and the veterans themselves eventually passed away. Although individual states, notably Connecticut and Virginia, had made some efforts to record veterans’ memories through questionnaires issued in the war’s immediate aftermath<sup>7</sup>, by the time the U.S. Army’s Military History Institute issued its own broad World War I veterans’ survey in the early 1980s many soldiers had passed away and the response was sparse. In a sense, American veterans of World War I had never been given the means to make sense of their war experiences through individual self-expression via the printed word. While many had been unwilling to speak, the American public had never really been willing to listen. It is notable, though, that lobbying by the American Legion’s weekly and monthly

publications, often the venue for the publication of soldiers' memories, helped to establish the National Archives in 1934 as a means of preserving war records.

Ironically, the publication or republication of a significant number of important American war memoirs from the 1990s to the present day has been facilitated by the desire of veterans' children and grandchildren to make sense of their parents' and grandparents' experiences and how these had impacted their families after their return home. Intrepid editor-historians have also played a vital role in bringing these to light. Valuable recent accounts include: [Carl Brannen \(1899-1977\)](#), *Over There: A Marine in the Great War* (1996), [Albert Ettinger \(1900-1984\)](#), *A Doughboy with the Fighting 69<sup>th</sup>* (1992), [Joseph Gleeson \(1893-1972\)](#), *A Soldier's Story* (1999), [Harvey Harris \(1895-1967\)](#), *The War As I Saw It* (1998), [Warren Jackson \(1896-1989\)](#), *His Time in Hell* (2001), Joseph Lawrence, *Fighting Soldier* (1985), [Frederick Libby \(1891-1970\)](#), *Horses Don't Fly* (2000), [Elton Mackin \(1898-1974\)](#), *Suddenly We Didn't Want to Die* (1993), and William Triplet, *A Youth in the Meuse-Argonne* (2000).

New opportunities to recover the war experiences of American men and women are appearing due to digital media. It is arguably true that published accounts are not representative (if indeed any collection of accounts can be such). For every veteran with the determination to see his or her memoir, diary, or collection of letters through to publication, there were hundreds if not thousands more who simply stored their accounts in drawers and attics. They had made sense of the war with pen or pencil and paper as best they could while the war raged, but after it ended they buried them away, presumably along with their memories. Although many if not most of these written unpublished accounts are now lost forever, a large number have reappeared. If they are not being bought and sold online, descendants or local historical societies are preserving them. Fortunately, special repositories for these accounts exist or are being created at institutions such as the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle, Pa., the Veterans' History Project at the Library of Congress, and recently, the Center for American War Letters at Chapman University in Orange, Ca. The Veterans' History Project in particular has taken the lead in digitizing a portion of its collection and making it available online for researchers. With further digitization efforts in the future, it may be possible to say much more about how Americans sought to make sense of the First World War.

The wider availability of source material in print and digital media should facilitate multiple new lines of scholarly inquiry. To this point scholars have primarily utilized these sources to present broad descriptions of the American war experience from enlistment to demobilization, with limited comparison to European and global experiences. New analyses might for example track how accounts changed chronologically in comparison with those written by non-American participants. Other useful studies might delve into these materials

for an improved understanding of American national identity and public opinion, and participants' senses of 'self.' The vagaries of memory and its meaning must also be taken into account. All in all, this promises to become a rich field of scholarly endeavor.

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## Notes

1. NARA RG 120, Entry 268, G-3 Secret Correspondence, Box 3154, Folder 1092. ↑
2. Ibid. ↑
3. Wright Catlin, Albertus: *With the Help of God and a Few Marines*, Garden City 1919, pp. 70 and 87. ↑
4. Wright Catlin, *With the Help of God* 1919, pp. 70 and 87. ↑
5. Bullard, Robert Lee: *Personalities and Reminiscences of War*, Garden City 1925, pp. 291-297; Emmett, Chris: *Give 'Way to the Right: Serving with the A.E.F. in France, During the World War*, San Antonio 1934), pp. 91, 232, 273, 281-282. ↑
6. Brooks, Alden: *As I Saw It*, New York 1930, pp. 171-174. ↑
7. Gutierrez, Edward A.: *Doughboys on the Great War: How American Soldiers Viewed Their Military Experience*, Lawrence 2014. ↑

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- [Catlin, Albertus Wright / Dyer, Walter A.: \*\*With the help of God and a few marines\*\*, Garden City, 1919: Doubleday, Page & Co.](#)
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- [Zander, Harry W.: \*\*Thirteen years in hell\*\*, Boston, 1933: Meader Pub. Co.](#)

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## External Links

- [Allen, Hervey: \*\*Toward the Flame: A War Diary, New York 1934 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)\*\*](#)
- [Barkley, John Lewis: \*\*No hard feelings!, New York 1930 \(HathiTrust\) \(Book\)\*\*](#)
- [Brooks, Alden: \*\*As I saw it, New York 1930 \(HathiTrust\) \(Book\)\*\*](#)
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- [Hunton, Addie W./Johnson, Kathryn M.: Two Colored women with the American Expeditionary Forces, Brooklyn, N. Y. 1920 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
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- [The Center for American War Letters \(Chapman University\) \(Database\)](#)
- [U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center \(U.S. Army\) \(Institutional Website\)](#)
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- [Wrentmore, Ernest L.: In spite of hell, New York 1958 \(HathiTrust\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Zander, Harry W.: Thirteen years in hell, Boston 1933 \(HathiTrust\) \(Book\)](#)

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